

Elegia by [htbthomas](#)

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Summary:

Only Nancy knows when she's mourned enough.

Elegia

Author's Note:

- For [AceQueenKing](#).

Thanks to my beta, blithers!

Nancy scuffs at the tile under the left corner of her desk. It's raised just a little, slowly working free from years of students doing the same thing. She's only been sitting here for a few days, but it catches the rubber in the sole of her shoe in just the right way, making a *brrp* sound each time.

The kid next to her notices it, but she ignores his annoyed look. He's taking detailed notes on the lecture, half his page filled, and the scratching of his pen is just as irritating, but has she said anything?

She goes back to doodling on the corner of her note page. She's got maybe... two sentences about the three branches of government and whatever the teacher is droning on about. She can read up in her textbook later. Probably.

Brrp. Brrp. Brrp. It's like a tick, a soothing tick that makes the time go faster. Time is always so slow these days. Just existing from one moment to the next in a world where everything is insane but everyone is pretending like it's still normal.

The bell rings and she gathers up her things to make the trek to the next interminable hour. After she stands, her fingertips brush the edge of the desk, just where she used to touch to remind Barb that it was time to go to the next class. When Barb sat in that desk and scuffed her foot in the same way.

Nancy lingers in the hallway, her shoulder against the locker door. She's talking to someone, always someone, usually about nothing she'll remember the next morning. Not much sticks these days. But somehow the words come together and everyone thinks she's fine. She's back to her old self, the one before Steve, the one before Will,

the one before Barb.

She's not really, but outward appearance means a lot in high school. She could be hiding a whole demogorgon inside her, two of them maybe, and the senior chatting her up wouldn't notice. He'd still ask if she wanted to go get a burger and see a drive-in movie.

Sometimes Steve walks by when she's in the middle of one of these inane conversations. They're not together anymore, as much as he wanted it. But they can't go back to whatever they had before the Upside Down, because that was normal. He keeps looking for normal again and that's never going to happen.

He catches her eye and gives her a smile like a hello, and she returns it, but he knows it's just a hello and she knows he's trying to move on. And the senior catches it and gets a little stiff like he knows there's history he can't overcome.

She never gets that burger or sees that movie.

The next semester there's a new kid, a freshman. "Uh, I think that's my locker?"

She doesn't even look. "No, sorry. This one's mine. But I think 320 is open."

He blinks at the paper in his hand with the number of the locker she's always leaning against. "But this says—"

"*Trust* me." She cuts her eyes toward 320. "That one's yours."

He doesn't argue more, which is good, because it's not his fault that he can't have this one. She sighs and spins the combination lock, left, right, left. The locker still has all of Barb's posters with Matthew Broderick on them. The edges are curling up. Her old textbooks are in there, too, never returned. She breathes in the musty smell and lets it coat her lungs. The bell rings and she closes and relocks the door.

Shouldering her backpack, she goes to class. Giving the new kid her old locker is worth the price of keeping Barb's, since she doesn't use it anymore. She carries everything everywhere now. It feels lighter than the memories, anyway.

Summer brings heat and humid air and watching Mike and his friends ride past on their bikes to wherever they go these days. They used to have a family membership at the swim club, but her mom let it lapse. No one uses it anymore.

Nancy's been going on long walks at twilight, when the worst of the heat is almost gone. Before she leaves, her mom gives her one of those red-rimmed looks, like she's worried but not saying anything. But she lets Nancy go. She'd only sneak out anyway, and it's better if no one is lying about it.

She never knows where she's going, not at first, taking a different route every time. But just when the sun is dipping below the horizon, she looks around at where she is. It's always here, even when she thinks she's going somewhere else. The forest. The tree. The portal.

It's not a portal now. It's just a tree with a hollow in the trunk that you can see into, and it has an ending, a finite amount of space inside. She's looked with a flashlight. She always looks, so many times that she's memorized it. She would notice if a squirrel made a single scratch with its claws or a new spiderweb appeared in a corner. But she sits there now, her back against the trunk and watches the sky darken to full black.

A sound off to the west draws her attention but she doesn't flinch. She knows the sound, the footfalls are familiar. Jonathan sits beside her, not too close, but close enough that his presence is felt. And he doesn't talk either. They don't talk when they're out here. It's not right.

At the Memorial Day barbecue in her backyard they found a corner to sit together, eating hot dogs and potato chips and her watching his face as he watches his brother. They didn't talk much, just once when Jonathan said, "He's back, but it's like he's not back, you know?" all the while looking at Will.

She knows. Barb's gone but she's not gone. She can't be gone as long as Nancy remembers her, remembers the things she liked and the places she existed and the places she stopped existing.

She lets one of her hands drop from where she's been clasping them between her knees. It lands in the clutter of leaves between them, an invitation. His hand comes down, too, his pinky finger twitching against hers, asking for permission. She takes it, her fingers entwining with his. It's all she wants now, all she can handle.

The two of them sit, holding onto each other against the falling darkness.